DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 461 993 FL 027 139

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TITLE Bringing out Children's Wonderful Ideas in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language.
PUB DATE 2001-00-00
NOTE 13p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS After School Programs; Art Activities; *Chinese; Creative Teaching; Elementary Secondary Education; Games; *Second Language Instruction; Student Participation; Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

This paper describes one after-school program at the Cambridge Chinese School, dedicated to teaching Chinese literacy to Chinese K-12 students in the Boston, Massachusetts area. In 1998, the school initiated the "Chinese as a Foreign Language" program to cater to the needs of U.S. families with an interest in the Chinese language and culture (foreign language learners, as opposed to second language learners, do not live in the target language environment). Students in the program included adopted Chinese children, children with Chinese immigrant parents, biracial children, and white children with an interest in Chinese. The paper describes one semester of teaching the program, focusing on syllabus design and classroom teaching. The syllabus involved 10 lessons that emphasized: asking permission, people and family, colors, animals, fruits, body parts, and clothing. Each lesson involved 20-minute work periods with breaks in between. The teacher discovered that children had many good ideas as they studied Chinese. They liked to brainstorm and guess about what written Chinese characters meant, and they produced useful ideas in their oral exchanges. The teacher learned the importance of listening to the learners' voices. Artwork (e.g., origami) and games (e.g., jumping rope to count numbers) were very effective in teaching Chinese to these students. (SM)

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Bringing out Children's Wonderful Ideas in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language

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Bringing out Children's Wonderful Ideas in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language

Introduction

Cambridge Chinese School is an after-school program dedicated to teaching Chinese literacy to Chinese K-12 students living in the Greater Boston area. From September 1998, a new program, Chinese as a Foreign Language,[1] was initiated to cater to the needs of American families that have an interest in Chinese language and culture. Originally there were 12 students, mostly seven-year-olds. But after a semester, five of them quit. The parents complained that the teaching was too sophisticated and not engaging enough for young children. I, with my background in second language acquisition, was hired in January 1999 to improve the situation.

Among the seven students,[2] Lili, Kim, and Mary were adopted from China; Kris has a Chinese mother and American father; Mike's parents came from Hong Kong; Greg and Mark are white American children whose parents want them to learn Chinese. None of the students spoke Chinese at home, and only Kris could get some help on Chinese from her mother after class.

The class met twice a week on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons from 3:30 to 5:30. During the first week I tried to figure out what the students had learned in the previous four months. Most children could count from 1 to 10, sing some children's songs, and say a few simple sentences such as "Hello!" "Goodbye." Most could write the numbers from 1 to 10, and fewer than five simple characters. Almost all parents said such

[1] The distinction between a second language and a foreign language is that a second language learner lives in the target language environment whereas a foreign language learner does not.

progress was too slow. However, some of them had the opinion that the children had worked at school all day and should not be burdened with rigorous study any more. Therefore, I had the pressure of engaging the students in serious learning and creating a fun environment for them to learn in. It was a challenging task. I will synthesize my one semester of teaching experience in terms of syllabus design and classroom teaching.

Syllabus

We were provided with two types of Chinese textbooks: oral Chinese and written Chinese. They are specially designed for Chinese children who live out of China. The assumption is that their native language is Chinese. The written textbook starts with simple characters, such as numbers, and gradually includes two-character words, which are mostly very basic characters. I decided to use it. The oral Chinese textbook starts with long dialogues, which I thought too difficult for my students. It was a pity that I could not find a suitable oral textbook for beginning learners of Chinese. Under the suggestions of a parent, I created a syllabus of my own.

I was used to teaching according to a textbook. It was the first time I had to literally make up my own "textbook". Opal Dunn 's work (1998) helped me a lot. Dunn stresses repeatedly that "For children all language--their own or a foreign language--is embedded in learning about everyday life. It's part of their holistic development" (p. 39) and that "Children need specific foreign language for coping with everyday life" (p. 60). She thus suggests the inclusion of such everyday language as numbers, colors, nouns (for

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[2] Throughout the paper, pseudonyms are used instead of the children's real names.

family, parts of the body, clothes, home, time), conjunctions, verbs (be, want, like), prepositions of place (in, on, under), and adjectives.

For a four-month semester, it was impractical to cover all this content. I chose to teach ten lessons, focusing on: greetings, asking for permission, people and family, colors, animals, fruits, parts of the body, and clothing. The expressions I selected for "Greetings" are frequently used everyday exchanges such as “How are you,” “Nice to meet you.” I included four sentences under "Asking for permission," because every time some of the students would ask if they could go to the bathroom, drink water, have a rest, or play. Although these sentences were difficult to pronounce, I decided to teach them at the beginning, because I believed that constant repetition would help the students remember. Topics like colors, animals, fruits, and clothing are appealing to students' interest. I especially included several language points (e.g., “this is…,” “I want…,” and using colors to describe nouns) in many lessons in order that they be repeated many times.

Although this was an oral Chinese syllabus, it would have been better if there could be an accompanying textbook with colorful images and corresponding exercises. But due to the limit of time and resources, I could only record the ten lessons on one side of an audiotape for the children to listen to and reinforce at home. For each expression, I first read the English version, and after a pause, read the Chinese version. It turned out to work quite well. The students who did listen at home learned faster and remembered more clearly. On the other side of the tape, I collected fifteen children's songs, since for children, singing songs can be both an interesting activity and an effective way of learning the language.

Dunn (1998) points out that

Without a plan it is more difficult:
- To build on familiar language;
- To introduce effective practice;
- To limit your own language to what the child needs (p. 83).

My experience told me that it is very important to teach a foreign language with good planning, no matter how young the learners are, because they are not in the language-speaking environment and thus need deliberately designed lessons for repetition, reinforcement, and gradual improvement.

Classroom Teaching

Each lesson was supposed to last for two hours, from 3:30 to 5:30 pm. Of course, it is impossible to require the seven-year-olds to be well focused for such a long time, especially at the end of the day when they are already exhausted from their regular school, and possibly, very hungry. I broke down the time into small periods, each of which consisted of not more than 20 minutes. We would review old lesions, have a break, learn new lessons, play games, take a snack, do origami or sing songs toward the end of the class.

Throughout the semester, many interesting and insightful interactions happened in the classroom, which constantly provoked my reflections on effective language teaching approaches and the relationship between learning and teaching.

Children have very wonderful ideas

Linguists have observed in first language acquisition that children not simply imitate what adults say; they also consciously apply some grammar rules in their

language production. That is why we hear children say *bringed, goed, singed, foots, sheeps, childs* (Fromkin & Rodman, 1983). These errors are not necessarily a bad thing; they are a signal that the child is engaged in active reasoning and that learning is taking place. This is in accordance with Duckworth's (1996) repeated assertions that children have very wonderful ideas in the learning process. I discovered a lot of wonderful ideas in my students' learning of Chinese.

One example came from their learning of Chinese characters. Drastically different from the English writing system, Chinese is a type of pictographic system in which the characters are meant to resemble the actual objects they represent. To help alleviate the students' fear of coping with such a "strange" writing system, I would write the character on the blackboard and ask them to guess the meaning according to its shape. The children loved guessing. For the word "田" their guesses included *window, door, book, and picture frame*. I waited patiently for them to finish. Instead of saying that they were all wrong, I said all their guesses were reasonable and close to the real word, *field*, since they were all in the shape of blocks. "Oh, I know! I know!" Kris excitedly ran to the blackboard and pointed at the outside frame of the character: "It's the border of the field. Or the fence that protects the field." She then pointed at the two strokes inside the frames: "These are the paths in the field." I was impressed at her ideas. It turned out that after such playing around with the character, all the students remembered it very clearly afterwards. The effect was much better than putting the word on the board and directly telling them what it means.

According to a theory of psycholinguistics, human's left brain is used for processing language, and right brain for processing image. Stimulating both sides of the

brain will make learning more efficient. Therefore, connecting characters with pictures is a very effective way of teaching Chinese literacy (Gu, 2000). For instance, to teach the character " 人"(person), I would bring a picture of a person standing with her legs apart. For the character " 上"(up), I would draw a branch growing upward from a tree, with a layer of soil spread at the bottom.

Of course, due to the evolution of language, many Chinese characters have lost the association between meaning and shape. In such cases, I would try my best to help break the character down to parts that the children were familiar with. For example, "坐" could be considered to consist of three parts. The children had learned that "人" means *person* and "土" means *soil*. I wrote down the character on the board in the following way:

人人
土

I then asked, "What are the two persons doing on the soil?" The children started to guess: "Playing!" "Working!" "Reading together!" "Digging the soil!" "Sitting!" "Having a rest!" I expressed satisfaction over all their answers and said it means *to sit*. "They are sitting shoulder by shoulder!" the children cried, and they remembered this character.

Wonderful ideas occurred in oral exchanges as well. After teaching the nouns for colors and animals, I distributed some black-and-white pictures of animals printed out from the computer and asked the children to color them with crayons. Seeing that Greg color his bear in brown, I asked the class, "How do we describe Greg's bear?" I had taught brown (zong se) and bear (xiong), but I had not told them how to put these two

nouns together. "I know! I know!" Greg cried out, "zong…xiong?" My original intention was to teach the standard structure *zong se de xiong*. An auxiliary *de* is usually put between the modifier and the noun to be modified. However, *zong xiong* is also acceptable in Chinese. I was surprised at his instinct and said "Very good." Encouraged by my attitude, the other children who painted their animals in more than one color were brave enough to speak out: *fen-hei-bai yu* (pink-black-white fish) or *hong-huang-lan niao* (red-yellow-blue bird). I had never heard of these expressions in Chinese. Actually, I did not know how to describe these multi-colored animals myself, since no adult would talk about such bizarre colored animals! As no previous convention was set up in this respect, their creation could be the convention. And their language did convey the meanings. So what I could do but greet their answers with "Excellent!" and "Great!" I was indeed amazed at children's imagination and creativity in learning a language.

Duckworth (1996) points out that to provide occasions for wonderful ideas, one has to be "willing to accept children's ideas," and to provide "a setting that suggests wonderful ideas to children--different ideas to different children--as they are caught up in intellectual problems that are real to them" (p. 7). I used to teach English as a foreign language to adults in China, where I acted as the authority of the classroom and the students respectfully noted down what I said. It is through teaching children in the US that I come to realize how important it is to listen to learners' voice, and how creative they could be.

The power of artwork and games

Teaching a foreign language to children is in many ways different from teaching adults. Adults are considered by some researchers to be superior to children in language

learning, which is partly due to their ability in analyzing the structures (Diller, 1978). When teaching adults, I used to do a lot of grammar analysis and they found it useful. It obviously did not work on children. As Dunn (1998) suggests, "Children learn by doing. They learn language by taking an active part in something that interests them and is right for their age and ability. Adults call it playing, but to the child, play is a serious worklike activity" (pp. 20-21). I found artwork and games effective ways of making children learn.

Origami is a form of Asian art through which paper is made into various objects. I used it as a game not simply to give fun at the end of the day, but to introduce or reinforce some language points. For instance, almost every time we needed a square piece of paper. So I got the chance to repeat *zheng fang xing* (square) many times. Other words such as *triangles, to fold, to turn over* are also gradually conveyed to students with my actions instead of any explanations. After learning colors, I would bring in different colors of paper and let the children choose in Chinese. When we finished making something, say a boat, I would point to each child's boat and said, "Lili de chuan (Lili's boat), Mike de chuan, Kris de chuan…" Before I finished, Mary, as well as other children, would be eager to raise her boat and say "Mary de chuan." Sometimes we had more time and the children made more than one object, I would purposely say, "Mike you san ge (Mike has three). Kim you liu ge (Kim has six)." The children had learned some simple numbers, but not the word *you* (to have) and *ge* (an auxiliary to denote unit). But when I turned to Kris and said, "Kris …" deliberately stopping there, she could continue by herself, "you qi ge (seven)." It seems that when children are engaged with something relevant to them, they would automatically practice.

In another occasion, the children made a lot of big or small turtles. We happened to have just learned some terms to talk about family members. So I pointed to a big turtle and said, "wu gui ba ba (turtle dad)." Mark immediately pointed to another big turtle, saying, "wu gui ma ma (turtle mom)." Then he pointed to a smaller one and said "wu gui ge ge (turtle older brother)." Kim pointed to another smaller one and asked, "How to say turtle sister? You didn't teach us!" I said "Older sister is jie jie, and younger sister is mei mei." The children then set out to use these terms to describe their paper turtles. It is obvious that when children have a need to use the language, they will be willing to take the initiative to learn. A good teacher should be imaginative enough to create such occasions, or be quick enough to grasp such opportunities when they occur.

Children are good at inventing games too. Once we were learning from the written textbook how to write *stand up* and *sit down*. Lili suddenly cried out, "Everybody! Do according to what I say! Qi li (stand up)!" All the children stood up. "Zuo xia (sit down)!" she made another command and all the children sat down. She kept on doing this three more times and the children happily followed her. It suddenly occurred to me that Lili was actually using a kind of language teaching approach called Total Physical Response (TPR), which I learned in my teacher training program in China. In this approach, the teacher gives out orders in the target language in imperative forms, and students carry the orders out. The underlying assumption is that verbal rehearsal accompanied by motor activity increases the probability of successful recall (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). At that time, since our students were all advanced adult learners, my colleagues and I all considered this approach naive or stupid. I had never thought how children could be excited about it! It was indeed a good opportunity for me to reflect

upon and reevaluate some language teaching methods that I had learned. In the following classes when we learned some other action expressions like *go out, come in*, and *walk*, I would purposely use TPR, and the children always got excited.

Some other games we played included rope jumping to count numbers, using animal stickers to make up stories, picking out favorite foods from supermarket advertisements, and bouncing a ball in turn to do additions. Language learning can happen everywhere, and with great fun!

Conclusion

It is impossible to document in such limited space all the interesting and exciting episodes that happened this semester. Parents reported that the children enjoyed such style of teaching and developed deeper love for the Chinese language and culture. From my little students I learned the invaluable lesson that children have very very wonderful ideas. It is the teacher's responsibility to respect their ideas, and provide opportunities to bring out their ideas.

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